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Literature

Re-Reading *Atlas Shrugged*

J. H. Huebert

Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged*:*
A Philosophical and Literary Companion
Edited by Edward W. Younkins
Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007
428 pp., index

As Jerome Tuccille's book title famously observed, a young person's introduction to the world of libertarian thought often begins with the work of Ayn Rand. Her masterpiece, *Atlas Shrugged*, gives the reader an emotionally compelling but rational framework for understanding the world and assures the frustrated adolescent that he, the non-conforming much-resented achiever destined for greatness, is not alone in the world.

That wasn't the case with me, though. I discovered radical individualism through Harry Browne's rather more laid-back book, *How I Found Freedom in an Unfree World*, and learned more about the freedom philosophy and free-market economics through Leonard Read and *The Freeman* magazine. I got around to Rand soon enough, and found *The Virtue of Selfishness* and some of Rand's other non-fiction useful, but I soon moved on to other thinkers, especially Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard. When I finally read *Atlas Shrugged* years later, I did so out of a sense of obligation. Because I was already familiar with (and shared) most of its ideas, the book was not the revelation for me that it had been for so many others. As the years passed after I read *Atlas*, it diminished further in my mind, and I found myself agreeing with those who dismissed it (whether or not they had read it) as propaganda primarily suited for adolescents, with minimal literary merit.

I recently returned to *Atlas Shrugged*, though, and found it far

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more powerful than I remembered. As our politicians grab ever more power on ever-more-dubious pretenses, the plot about a Remnant escaping to leave the looters and the moronic masses that empower them to the fate they deserve is more compelling than ever.

My eyes were opened further by a new book, *Ayn Rand's* Atlas Shrugged: *A Philosophical and Literary Companion*, edited by Edward W. Younkins, which collects thirty-six essays from a variety of contributors offering literary, philosophical, economic, historical, and personal insights on Rand's great novel. First and foremost I should note that, for an anthology from an academic press, this was a surprisingly fast and fun read. The book's essays are short (mostly around ten pages) and readily comprehensible by any reasonably intelligent person. The only prerequisite to understanding the volume (other than an active mind) is *Atlas Shrugged* itself—and even that is nicely synopsized by Younkins at the outset. And while the essays are substantive and scholarly, one can also see and feel the joy most of the authors take in discussing one of their favorite books. Their enthusiasm rubs off as they provide the reader with even more reasons to appreciate *Atlas Shrugged.*

Perhaps the most common criticism of *Atlas Shrugged*, even from those who are sympathetic to its ideas, is that it is not good literature. A recent *New York Times Book Review* article on "literary deal breakers"—that is, books one's date could mention as favorites that would ruin any chance of a relationship— prominently mentioned Ayn Rand (Donadio 2008, 27). (For example, a book critic had to break up with a boyfriend because he liked Rand—"I just thought Rand was a hilariously bad writer, and past a certain point I couldn't hide my amusement.") Even many libertarians have happily dismissed the book, as one of the volume's essays notes, as "garbage" and "a piece of shit," *inter alia*. The evidence offered in the anthology's essays should prompt such critics to check their premises. Put another way, if *Atlas Shrugged* is not one's idea of good literature, then one probably needs a new definition of good literature. How many other novels could prompt discussions on such a wide array of topics, from people in such a wide array of disciplines? How many novels address so many important ideas on so many levels? How many books integrate their every last detail into the book's theme so well? This anthology should force critics to consider such questions.

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In reviewing this sort of collection, one can either pick a few essays to critique in detail or provide a general overview with editorial comments at various points along the way. I choose the latter because that seems more useful to someone deciding whether to read the book.

Overview

The first section of the *Companion* considers the novel's structure and themes. As noted above, Younkins provides a synopsis that would suffice to orient (and spoil all the fun for) someone who hasn't read *Atlas Shrugged.* He effectively explains the book's plot-theme ("the mind on strike") and how the plot has "an inexorable internal logic in which the intellectual puzzle is acted out and solved by the heroes" (Younkins 2007, 15–16). He explains how Rand alters and expands Greek myths to serve her purpose (18)—an idea Kirsti Minsaas expands upon in her essay later in the book. Younkins also ably defends one of the more-criticized aspects of *Atlas Shrugged*, the characters' speech-making. As he notes, the speeches are important because they "make explicit the principles dramatized throughout the actions of the novel, and move the story onward" (18–19).

Younkins also discusses the novel's attack on the notion of a mind-body dichotomy—an important theme in the book that many of the anthology authors visit, including Chris Matthew Sciabarra in the book's second essay. Applying the same ideas found in his book, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*, Sciabarra explains that *Atlas Shrugged* is a manifesto not just for a political radicalism, but for a "radical way of *thinking* upon which political and social change is built" (23). *Atlas Shrugged* shows degeneration on three levels: the personal, cultural, and structural (political and economic). Sciabarra shows how these levels work together, and how, according to Rand, a radical change in thinking is required in all three to save the world.

Douglas B. Rasmussen's essay considers "The Aristotelian Significance of the Section Titles of *Atlas Shrugged*"—"Non-Contradiction," "Either-Or," and "A is A"—as a jumping-off point to respectfully critique Rand's lack of appreciation for "the difference between logic and reality" (44). He claims this confusion entangles Rand "in some serious conceptual knots"—knots the Aristotelian tradition gets right. Rasmussen—one of the foremost professional philosophers to

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contend seriously with Rand's ideas—provides one of the more challenging (less accessible) essays in the volume for the non-specialist.

Fred Seddon examines the "various levels of meaning" in each of the book's chapter titles and how Rand cleverly uses these titles to convey multiple meanings. For example, Chapter II's title, "The Chain," refers to the bracelet of Rearden Metal, the chain by which Rearden is accused of holding his family in bondage, and the chain of altruism that binds Rearden to his family of ingrates (47–48). For Chapter V, "The Climax of the d'Anconias," Seddon points out that each generation of d'Anconias had raised the production of the family company's copper, and that Rand may have been foreshadowing the climax seen in "the explosive end of all the d'Anconia copper on earth" later in the book (48–49). Seddon does not mention that this chapter also contains the sex scene between Francisco and Dagny.

Lester H. Hunt takes note of more structural aspects of the book, notably Rand's "omnipresent" "twinning" of "meaning-bearing elements that are linked by salient similarities in potentially significant ways" (59). For example, there are two steel magnates, two major train rides, two contrasting love affairs (James and Cherryl, Dagny and Rearden), two professors, two characters with mixed premises (Rearden and Stadler), and so on. With this device, Rand is able to show similarities and to "throw a glaring light on important differences" (61).

Illustrating how well this *Companion* brings together the academic and the pragmatic, Hans Gregory Schantz provides a more-detailed table of contents for *Atlas Shrugged*, a convenient way to locate any particular event in the book (63–72).

Philosophy

The estimable Tibor Machan kicks off the book's section on philosophy (of course, philosophy pervades the whole book) with an essay on the "Sanction of the Victim" (75–88). In keeping with the book's general tone and spirit, he first shares details of his own in-person meeting with Rand as a young man and an exchange they had on the subject of his essay. Free will is a necessary prerequisite to a victim giving his sanction, and this leads Machan into a broader discussion of free will in general, including a refutation of David

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Dennett's arguments that the idea of free will is somehow mysterious or "spooky." Machan is able and interesting in rebutting Dennett, but he acknowledges that his essay is not "the place where the full story" of free will can be told. This leads one to wonder why he spent the space on it that he did (much of the essay), especially when the chapter's title promised a discussion of "*Atlas Shrugged*'s Moral Principle of The Sanction of the Victim."

Roderick Long shows (89–97) how *Atlas Shrugged* appears to be intended as a critique of, and alternative to, some of the central ideas in Plato's *Republic*. Plato at once embraced reason, justice, and self-interest as compatible with each other—but also endorsed a collectivist political regime run by a supposedly selfless philosopher-king. Long demonstrates how this paradox arises out of Plato's distinction between the material realm and the realm of spirit, how Robert Stadler reflects this confusion in *Atlas Shrugged*, and how the villains of *Atlas Shrugged* try to force John Galt to rule as a philosopher-king would be forced to rule. The entire novel, Long shows, provides an attack on Plato's mind/body dichotomy. With Long's helpful explanation, *Atlas Shrugged* may serve as a powerful antidote to (and clarification of) Plato's ideas for students.

G. Stolyarov II rounds out the philosophy section (99–106) with an essay examining the "role and essence" of John Galt's speech.

Literary Aspects

Mimi Reisel Gladstein's essay shows how *Atlas Shrugged* reflects Rand's love for the movies. She shows how the book is written with a cinematic eye—with its masculine way of looking at Dagny; its choices in the details it describes; the use of wide shots, medium shots, and close-ups; even the descriptions of costumes. In sum, Rand provides detailed instructions for whoever eventually makes the film of *Atlas Shrugged*. (Of course, Gladstein takes due note of certain aspects of *Atlas* that aren't so cinematic—for example, John Galt's speech, read at a normal pace, would require about 3 hours and 30 minutes of screen time (117).)

Jeff Riggenbach looks (121–30) at why *Atlas Shrugged* falls within the science fiction genre—at least, according to Robert Heinlein's definition of science fiction, if not Rand's own. Kirsti Minsaas, as noted above, explains (131–40) how Rand recasts ancient myths to

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suit her purpose. There is Atlas, of course, condemned to carry the world on his shoulders. Then there is Prometheus, whom Zeus chained to a rock for stealing fire from the gods and bringing it to man—but where other romantics have been content to use Prometheus as a symbol of heroic *but doomed* striving, Rand turned Prometheus into a hero who ultimately succeeds. (In the book, Richard Halley similarly changes the Phaeton myth for his opera.) Then there is the legend of Atlantis, a city that supposedly sank after its once-virtuous inhabitants became corrupted. Here, again, we have an opportunity to compare and contrast: New York is Atlantis as in the legend, "sinking" as it is drained of intellectual power, while Galt's Gulch is a new Atlantis, a new utopia.

Aesthetics

Ronald F. Lipp writes an essay called "Atlas and Art," although it seems to have more to do with Rand's aesthetics generally than *Atlas* in particular. He argues for the importance of Rand's oft-overlooked ideas on aesthetics: "To care about the rest of her philosophy, but not her conception of the role of art, risks treating the manifestation and realization of Objectivism as though it is an intellectual game, not a real quest with actual, practical consequences" (144).

Russell Madden fills in some details on the practical value of Objectivist art, and *Atlas Shrugged* in particular, as "fuel for the soul." The book's purpose, above all, is to encourage and invigorate those of us who share its ideas to be uncompromisingly radical. Madden writes: "Even many who declare their allegiance to liberty are more concerned with how the statists 'feel' about them than they are in the fact that it is the enemies of freedom who should fear our condemnation, our judgment of their corrosive ideals and destructive actions" (172). This appears to be a deserved criticism of so-called libertarians who watch their words so they can continue to be welcome at inside-the-beltway cocktail parties. Madden urges radicalism rather than making nice with people who would ultimately destroy society. Pursuing such a radical agenda in such a hostile world is not an easy task. As he notes, "*Atlas Shrugged* provides us that indispensable breather we need to face our burdens as we work to craft our own values."

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Roger E. Bissell writes one of the book's more ambitious essays (157–65), inasmuch as his piece is intended to be a lecture delivered by Richard Halley on music theory. The ideas appear sound—indeed, a detailed discussion of this subject is welcome, for lack of such material from Rand herself. But Bissell's approach, writing as Halley, was unnecessary. I see no reason why he could not have written in his own voice.

Political Economy

Peter Boettke says of *Atlas Shrugged* that "one would be hard pressed to find a more economically literate novel written by a non-economist " (180). In an essay that is derived from his contribution to the Spring 2005 *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* "Centenary Symposium" on "Ayn Rand Among the Austrians," Boettke explains the economics of *Atlas*—but, of course, the novel does a pretty good job of explaining its economics already. Boettke notes that Rand "explicates many of the basic principles of public choice economics—namely the concentration of benefits on the well-organized and well-informed and the dispersal of costs among the uninformed masses" (184).

Bryan Caplan's essay (215–24) expands upon Rand's understanding of public-choice ideas—which she acquired before there was such a thing as "public choice" economics. Libertarians sometimes criticize Rand for liking big business too much (and identifying it as the "most persecuted minority") but *Atlas* and this discussion of public-choice economics show that Rand understood well that big business often gets in bed with government to the detriment of consumers.

If Rand wasn't blind to the problems of corporate capitalism, she *was* blind to an important implication of her views, according to the late Larry Sechrest. His essay shows that Rand should have carried her ideas a step further to endorse a stateless society. After all, Galt's Gulch functions fine without a state—relying on "custom" rather than "law"—and Ragnar Danneskjöld also enforces the Objectivist idea of justice independently of any state. Rand and many of her followers insist that a state is somehow necessary to establish "objective" justice—but Rand never explains why a state is more likely than private alternatives to establish objective law. As Sechrest shows, Rand's assumption is ill-founded: states *never* remain limited

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and *always* become criminal enterprises. Sechrest quotes (194) Hans-Hermann Hoppe's observation (Hoppe 1999, 33–34) that a "tax-funded protection agency is a contradiction in terms and will lead to ever more taxes and less protection." Sechrest makes the case that Rand should have understood this, but for some reason—perhaps simply limited knowledge of economics and history—did not. One possible explanation he suggests (in Younkins 2007, 190) is Rand's experience with Bolshevism in the Soviet Union. Certainly, the Russian Revolution may have played a role: at that time, many people experienced an "anarchy" of sorts in between regimes that truly was the chaos that most people associate with that term.

Spencer Heath MacCallum describes Werner Stiefel's attempts to create a floating settlement called "Atlantis" as a real-world Galt's Gulch. One can also read about these efforts in the context of the libertarian movement of the time in Brian Doherty's book, *Radicals for Capitalism* (2007, 400–4). Sam Bostaph discusses (207–14) the economics of Galt's Gulch.

Rounding out this section, Steven Horwitz shows (225–36) how Rand correctly analyzed the economics of money, and Jack Criss shows that Rand's philosophy leads, in the novel's characters as in the real world, to productivity.

Human Relationships

Karen Michalson offers the only entry that struck me as out of place in this volume. Her essay, "Dagny and Me," vents her annoyance at some obnoxious pseudo-intellectual acquaintances who were Rand fans. After hearing her "self-important" (246) friends wax enthusiastic over Rand and Dagny Taggart in particular, Michalson "longed to meet Dagny," because "when a group of people get religion about a character, something in the character is worth studying" (247). As she seeks to understand the character better, she urges Dagny (247): "Teach me how to live, how to be strong, how to make the trains run against impossible odds. Show me what it means to honor one's self without apology or shame." She finds, however, that Dagny does not do this for her—she can "see, but not really feel" Dagny's greatness. She finds Dagny difficult to relate to in part because Dagny was not only brilliant, but also inherited "the clout to get that brilliance noticed" (248). Michalson believes "the latter is

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much more difficult to achieve" (248), particularly for a humanities scholar such as herself: "although many choose the values of hard work and purposeful devotion to a goal, few are chosen" (249). Thus, while the other contributors to the *Companion* brim with enthusiasm for the material, Michalson apparently is not much of a fan. Michalson seems to be criticizing Rand for creating an insufficiently realistic character for a reader to relate to; on the other hand, Michalson's views on achievement and "few" being "chosen" for greatness may strike Rand's admirers as a counterproductive attitude.

Joy Bushnell does better in her essay that follows on John Galt as "the dream of every woman." She explains that John Galt is desirable because any "rational woman" wants a "man who can love and appreciate her strengths while being able to challenge her—a man that can claim what he knows to be his in the most intimate and profound way" (251). She calls attention to the fact that romantic relationships among Rand's characters are based on "the reality of now"—not, like most romantic relationships, on notions of what the future will be like. This is why Dagny cannot love Francisco based upon his virtues in the past—and can be with Rearden while also knowing that he is not "the man of her dreams." This insight is of considerable practical value—how many relationships, especially marriages, are entered into on the premise that one will feel now as one always feels, or that the other person will become something that they are not? Being realistic about the present and future is critical, but something many or most people fail to do.

Peter Saint-Andre looks at "Friendship in *Atlas Shrugged*." He shows first why many pairings in the book cannot illustrate the ideal of friendship. Dagny and Francisco lack sufficient "intimacy and reciprocal self-disclosure" and their relationship "borders on the dysfunctional" as a result (264). Galt and Francisco are unevenly matched. Of course, that's true of Galt and *everyone*, which leads Saint-Andre to wonder whether Galt "would want or need friends" at all (266). Francisco and Rearden do provide an ideal of friendship: neither worships the other, but instead they interact dynamically to improve each other (267–68).

Jennifer L. Iannolo looks at the romantic-love relationships of *Atlas Shrugged*. *Atlas* shows love as it shouldn't be (James and Cherryl, Rearden and Lillian), love as it might be (Dagny and Francisco or

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Rearden), and love as it ought to be. Of course Rand sees the relationship between Dagny and Galt as the ideal, but Iannolo sees more to appreciate in the relationship between Ragnar Danneskjöld and his wife, Kay Ludlow. The book does not tell much about them, but makes clear that when "they are together, the outside world is but an afterthought, and what matters is the radiant, peaceful joy that each feels in the presence of the other" (277).

Susan Love Brown's essay discusses "virtuous sexuality" in *Atlas Shrugged.* Brown argues that Rand's ideas about sex are confused in *The Fountainhead*—where Roark rapes Dominique as "an act of scorn" rather than of love—but are more mature in *Atlas*, where sex is a response to values—again, bringing together the mind and the body (289). Undoubtedly Rand does show a healthier attitude toward sex and relationships in *Atlas Shrugged* than in *The Fountainhead.* Still, the chapter (or book) might have benefitted from more critical analysis of Rand's ideas about sex. Why would it be wrong for Francisco to be a playboy if that's what he wanted, for the sensual pleasure of it, or because he enjoys exercising his seduction skills? Why must one only have sex with someone who reflects one's highest values—when a physically pleasurable experience could be had and skills could be used and improved even with one who is less than the Randian ideal? Rand's assertions in *Atlas Shrugged* about sex and love are not supported by rigorous analysis—at least not within the novel, and not within the *Companion.* Elsewhere, Objectivist law professor David N. Mayer (2005) has written an essay that seems to take a less stringent view.

Characterization

Virginia Murr's essay explores further Hank Rearden's struggle with the mind-body dichotomy. By this point in the book, others have addressed this subject, but it is nonetheless valuable to have it explained clearly and concisely in one place (295–300).

An essay from Ken Schoolland and Stuart K. Hayashi ostensibly is about Hugh Akston but mostly is about Professor Schoolland's joy at seeing his own brilliant students succeed, much as Akston enjoyed the success of his own students, John Galt and Ragnar Danneskjöld. That's fine, but it's a bit peculiar inasmuch as the chapter is co-authored by Mr. Hayashi, even though it is written in the first person

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from Schoolland's perspective, and Mr. Hayashi is one of the students Schoolland praises (302).

Robert L. Campbell provides a thorough study of Eddie Willers' role in the novel in his essay "When the Train Left the Station, with Two Lights on Behind." (The title quotes lyrics from the song "Love in Vain," written by Robert Johnson and made famous by the Rolling Stones.) Campbell considers why Willers ultimately throws his life away—rather than tough it out until John Galt and company rebuild the world—and makes a strong case that Willers does so because he cannot bear to live knowing Dagny can never be his. Campbell also considers what we should make of Willers if he is "typical of those who have high moral integrity, but limited vision and limited stature" (320). Are those of us who are not "great men"—i.e., those of us who are relatively unlikely to, say, revolutionize physics or become "gods in human form" (321) like John Galt—doomed to "love a truly great one, with no expectation of being loved in return" (322)? It's an unpleasant implication if we rational human beings in the real world must either be John Galt or Eddie Willers. Campbell also wonders, echoing Nathaniel Branden, whether someone as immature and dependent as Willers could actually be as competent as he is and function as effectively as he does (322).

Every character in *Atlas Shrugged* serves some purpose, and Jomana Krupinski examines (326–29) the purpose of the "Wet Nurse." The Wet Nurse shows the struggle between what people are told is right and what they know deep down is right. Of course the Wet Nurse becomes a "dynamic free-thinker" just in time to be killed. His death symbolizes the death of the old school, and fuels the rebirth of the new in inspiring Rearden.

Finally, Jennifer J. Rhodes provides a thorough analysis of Cherryl Brooks Taggart's role in the book (331–34).

History

Stephen Cox is the world's foremost Isabel Paterson scholar, so it is fitting that he examines (337–46) Rand's relationship with Paterson and the extent to which Paterson—particularly her book, *The God of the Machine*—influenced Rand's work.

Douglas J. Den Uyl writes (347–61) about Rand's "American-ism," which leads him into the broader question of how best to

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advance classical liberalism: through a "diversity" approach that focuses only on the non-initiation of force, or through a "values" approach that promotes certain values among the populace. Den Uyl argues that a "values" approach is necessary because an "abstract conception of compossible rights and negative rules of conduct may be worth our allegiance, but they are not very instructive about what I (or you) should be like as we live our lives" and thus "their power to move is less than, say, Rearden's power as an exemplar for one's conduct" (357). This is a point well appreciated by most Objectivists, who reject libertarianism standing apart from Objectivist philosophy. And even if one does not embrace all of Objectivism, one must appreciate that common values in the populace may be a precondition to achieving liberty, even if those values are not what defines libertarianism, which is only a political program.

Speaking of defining libertarianism, Walter Block provides the next essay (363–75). He identifies "nonfictional Robert Stadlers"—that is, "Traitors to Liberty," as the chapter is titled. Who is a traitor, according to Block? Those "who full well appreciate the hazards and, yes, immorality of [government interventions] and yet still promote them" (363). These "traitors" include such regular objects of Block's disdain as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, and also Alan Greenspan, Williamson Evers, and Congressman Dana Rohrabacher. I agree with Block entirely—Greenspan, given his history with Rand and Objectivism, may provide the most appropriate analogy to Stadler —but it's all rather more tangential to *Atlas Shrugged* than most of the other essays in the volume.

Stuart K. Hayashi returns, by himself this time, to write an essay on "Atlas Shrugging Throughout History and Modern Life." He examines (377–91) studies that show that people tend to stop working when they are taxed above a certain amount, essentially in accordance with the Laffer Curve of supply-side economics. Whether such a response to incentives is really comparable to the heroic strike of the mind in *Atlas Shrugged* is debatable. Still, one cannot help but think of *Atlas Shrugged* in reading recent news stories about Argentinian farmers who refuse to ship their produce because tax rates are too high—a true strike by the productive against the looters (O'Grady 2008, A18).

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Conclusion

If all the above seems a bit cursory, it is simply because this book covers so much. That some pieces received more attention than others is regrettable and no reflection on their relative merit. To do this collection justice, one must read it all—and then re-read *Atlas Shrugged.*

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